

The Disruption and Urban Poverty: Thomas Chalmers and the West Port Operation in Edinburgh, 1844-47.¹

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As a social thinker, Thomas Chalmers, the celebrated 19th-century Scottish divine, is remembered chiefly for his ministry in St John's parish, Glasgow, between 1819 and 1824. In St John's, he had conducted an ambitious experiment in urban ministry, designed to demonstrate the means by which the Church of Scotland should reassert its waning spiritual and moral supervision over the crowded and increasingly irreligious working-class population of an early 19th-century city. The answer, he argued, lay in the traditional programmes of a rural parochial ministry, including regular household visitations by an agency of elders and deacons, a system of day and sabbath schools, the creation of a strictly parochial congregation, and parish poor relief based solely upon voluntary church-door collections and private charity. By energetically applying these programmes to the environment of industrial Scotland, he maintained that each Church of Scotland parish could be transformed into a closely-knit Christian community, with legal pauperism eliminated, and working-class political disaffection subsumed under an essentially pre-industrial communal spirit. Convinced of the success of his St John's experiment, Chalmers employed it as a model for two major social reform campaigns pursued during the 1820s and 1830s. First, he endeavoured to secure the abolition of poor relief which was supported by legal assessments on property, and which recognised a legal right of the poor to relief. Purely voluntary charity, he maintained, strengthened the sense of communal responsibility in the nation. Secondly, he campaigned for a radical increase in the number of Church of Scotland parish churches and schools, to ensure that despite the rapid increase in Scotland's population, particularly in urban districts, no parish population would exceed the manageable limit of 2,000 inhabitants. Fundamental to both campaigns was his desire to organise the entire Scottish population into small parochial

¹ The author expresses his special appreciation to the Rev. Eric Craig and the congregation of Chalmers Lauriston Church, Edinburgh, for permission to examine material in their possession relating to the West Port operation.

communities, modelled upon the St John's experiment, and under the authority of the established Church of Scotland.

Chalmers was engaged in pursuing both the poor law reform and church extension campaigns, when his parochial ideal was threatened and then apparently destroyed by the patronage and non-intrusion controversies between the church and civil courts leading to the disruption of the established Church of Scotland in 1843. This is not the place to outline the complex events which culminated in the secession of nearly half the membership of the established Church, and the formation of the Free Church. Suffice to say that although Chalmers had first attempted to arrange a compromise for the preservation of the establishment, in the end he was driven both by his principles and by the momentum of events to assume the leadership of the seceding party. The decision had been a difficult one for him personally. For, by assuming a leading rôle in the disruption of the Church of Scotland, he had helped deprive the nation of perhaps the only institution capable of mobilising sufficient resources for organising an effective national, social and ecclesiastical structure based upon his parochial ideal. The Disruption occurred, moreover, at a time when Edwin Chadwick's royal commission *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* and the investigations of W. P. Alison in Edinburgh were revealing atrocious conditions of mass destitution and ignorance in Scotland — social ills which Chalmers believed only his ideal parochial system could cure.

With the tenacity which had characterised his entire public career, the aging Chalmers refused to relinquish his parochial ideal. When the Disruption appeared imminent, he assumed the convenorship of the Free Church sustentation committee, attempting to mobilise voluntary subscriptions for the endowment of enough Free Church parishes to encompass the entire Scottish population within a "parochial economy". Despite impressive achievements by the sustentation committee, it very soon became evident that it could accomplish little beyond providing existing Free Church congregations with churches and ministers, organised on a gathered or congregational church principle. With the parochial system of the established Church of Scotland severely weakened by the Disruption, there was real danger that Scotland would lose altogether an effective parochial or territorial ecclesiastical system. Chalmers possessed no confidence in the competency of gathered or congregational churches to supervise adequately the moral and religious interests of the population. Gathered churches, in his conception, merely attracted individuals with previously-held religious conviction, and with the financial means to contribute to the support of the church, while neglecting the poor and irreligious. Such neglect, he believed, would prove

disastrous for the moral and religious condition of the nation, particularly in the squalid slums of the larger towns and cities.

In the summer of 1844, only a year after the Disruption, and while the Free Church was still struggling to provide its existing membership with ministers and churches, Chalmers boldly commenced the third major social reform campaign of his career. His plan was to create, through voluntary contributions and interdenominational effort, 60 additional churches in Edinburgh. Each new church was to function on the territorial principle, assuming the religious and moral supervision of a district of 2,000 inhabitants. In addition to religious services, the territorial churches were to provide a system of day and sabbath schools, and an agency of voluntary visitors to supervise the religious and moral condition of each household. The object of these programmes, of course, was the elimination of crime and legal pauperism, and the improvement of the condition of the working classes, through the creation of territorial Christian communities. According to his plan, the 60 new territorial churches would serve as models for the transformation of all the existing churches in Edinburgh from the gathered to the territorial church principle, until the entire city was divided into manageable districts of 2,000, each under the supervision of a church. The successful territorial organisation of Edinburgh would provide an example to be followed by Glasgow and the other cities of Scotland. Gradually, a society increasingly atomised by rapid industrialisation and urbanisation would be returned to the more stable communal social structure of its pre-industrial past.

The key to Chalmers' vision lay in the concept of interdenominational effort. After the Disruption, neither the Free Church nor the established Church alone possessed the resources to restore to Scotland's increasing population a territorial ecclesiastical structure. This end, Chalmers believed, could be achieved only through the participation of a number of protestant denominations — Baptists, Methodists, Episcopalians, Independents, Presbyterian seceders — each embracing the territorial principle. There was, moreover, another goal to be achieved through interdenominational co-operation for the social organisation of Scotland. Chalmers personally possessed little appreciation of the theological distinctions which separated the several protestant denominations. With a shared ideal for home mission expressed through co-operation in the community-building campaign, the various protestant denominations, he believed, would gradually be drawn more closely together. On the surface, he suggested, the interdenominational effort might assume the form of competition. Each of the 60 new territorial churches which he hoped to see erected in Edinburgh would have to be affiliated with some denomination. Affiliation, in turn,

would depend upon which denomination's members assumed the greater part of the financial and administrative effort in the organisation of the district. Ultimately, he trusted, competition would give way to co-operation in a shared social ideal, which in turn would help hasten the way towards the consummation of a great dream of protestant Christendom since the Reformation — church union among the protestant denominations "The most blessed result," he announced to an interdenominational meeting of clergymen interested in his campaign on 19th July 1844, "would follow from such a plan of intermingling co-operation, not only to the district towards which their labours would be directed, but also to themselves. The line of demarcation which separates the various denominations would in that way be trodden and retrodden, so soon to be altogether effaced and invisible."²

Chalmers described his territorial ideal and announced his interdenominational campaign in a series of four public lectures delivered at the Free Church College, Edinburgh, in June and July 1844.³ Despite the utopian appearance of the plan, he emphatically denied that it was an impractical personal vision. Rather, he asserted, it represented the accumulated experience of a lifetime of practical endeavour regarding the pressing questions of mass poverty and irreligion. One charge he was particularly anxious to refute. During his leadership of the church extension campaign in the established Church of Scotland in the 1830s, he had been continuously accused of concerning himself solely with the problem of raising money for the "stone and mortar" of church buildings, rather than with the more complex problem of creating viable territorial congregations. The present campaign, he asserted, would begin with the creation of territorial Christian communities. The supervision of each new district would consist of three related and coterminous operations. First, a voluntary association would be formed to look after a district of 2,000 inhabitants who were discovered through previous enquiry to be predominantly non-church-attenders. The district would be subdivided into at least 20 proportions, with a society member assigned to conduct regular household visitations and conduct a weekly prayer meeting in each proportion. Secondly, a system of day and sabbath schools would be established, with the expenses of the day schools defrayed by modest fees from the students. Thirdly, the society would employ a salaried missionary to conduct regular sabbath services, with attendance strictly limited to district

² *Witness*, 27th July 1844.

³ *Witness*, 19th June, 26th June, 13th July and 27th July 1844. During these months Chalmers delivered further lectures on his proposed territorial campaign to a select body of Free Church leaders on 28th June 1844, and to a quarterly meeting of the Edinburgh City Mission on 31st July 1844. (John Anderson, *Reminiscences of Thomas Chalmers* (Edinburgh, 1851), 341, 346; *Witness*, 7th August 1844.)

inhabitants. The costs of these operations, Chalmers assured his audiences, would be light, and easily met by modest donations from the society members. In a few years, he continued, the combined action of these three operations would have created a viable Christian community in the district. The community itself would then undertake the expense of erecting a formal church and school building, while community members would assume the visitation responsibilities. Its task complete, the voluntary association would then be disbanded, and the new territorial church would assume its place among the existing churches of the city. In order to demonstrate how such a district operation should be pursued, Chalmers further announced in his lectures that during the summer he had begun a model district operation in the West Port, one of the most impoverished and crime-ridden districts of Edinburgh. Rather than immediately create a central institutional apparatus, recruit the voluntary societies, and commence all 60 district operations simultaneously, he preferred that the Christian public of Edinburgh should first witness several months of his West Port operation, to learn its methods and be convinced of the viability of the territorial plan. In a word, the West Port operation was an educational device. If the operation succeeded in the West Port, he argued, the plan might be emulated in any district.

Although politely received, Chalmers' lectures generated little public interest.⁴ For many, apparently, the campaign seemed but the utopian dream of an aging man. There was, moreover, a substantial waning of public interest at this time in the concept of a territorial social ministry. In a debate in the Free Church general assembly on 21st May 1844, a significant number of younger members advocated that the Free Church should concentrate on a revivalist, or gathered church principle of organisation, rather than continue to squander its limited resources upon the territorial principle represented by Chalmers.⁵ Early in June 1844, Edinburgh town council, on the motion of lord provost Adam Black, requested the city churches of all denominations each to assume the moral and religious supervision of a district as part of a city-wide campaign against poverty, but the request met with virtually no response from the churches, and the plan had to be given up.⁶ The publication of the royal commission's report on the Scottish poor laws in late May 1844, had convinced many members of the Scottish public, including a

⁴ There was, for instance, a conspicuous lack of editorial comment regarding the lectures in the Edinburgh newspapers, with the exception of the *Scottish Herald and Weekly Advertiser* of 22nd June and 29th June 1844.

⁵ *Witness*, 21st May 1844.

⁶ *Scottish Herald and Weekly Advertiser*, 15th June 1844; Edinburgh City Chambers, Minutes of Edinburgh Town Council, vol. 241, pp. 254, 267, 316, 353, vol. 242, pp. 54-56; *Witness*, 4th February 1846.

majority of Free Church leaders, that poor relief administered solely by parochial churches was no longer sufficient, and that governmental boards were required to assume ultimate responsibility for levying legal assessments and disbursing relief.⁷ In short, if Chalmers hoped to create public enthusiasm for his vision of territorial Christian communities as a panacea for Scotland's social ills, he would have to achieve significant results in the West Port, and achieve them rapidly. The time element was of crucial importance.

The West Port district selected by Chalmers lay immediately to the south-west of Castle rock. The main road through the district, called simply the West Port, wound up a gradual incline from the Grassmarket, while a number of closes branched off from the West Port, each forming a neighbourhood in itself. Immediately to the north of the district was a cattlemarket and slaughterhouse. At the north-eastern end of the West Port, near the Grassmarket, stood a number of large boarding houses, like that at number one West Port, which according to the 1841 census schedule housed 180 lodgers, mainly single labourers, journeymen, female servants, and no doubt prostitutes. To the south-west, the road was lined with smaller residences of one to three families, housing more substantial master masons, butchers, blacksmiths and shoemakers.⁸ No map or description of the precise limits of the district of 2,000 inhabitants selected by Chalmers has survived. While his district included the whole of the West Port proper, it apparently did not include all the adjoining closes.⁹

Some idea of the social composition of the district may be gained from the 1841 census schedules for the West Port proper, and three closes, Killie Brae, Stevenson's Close, and St Cuthbert's Close, which most certainly were included in Chalmers' district. The population of this area in 1841 was 836, of whom 348, or 42% were listed as born outside Edinburgh county, and 110, or 13% as Irish. Occupations were listed for 353 of the 836 inhabitants, indicating the large proportion of childless lodgers. The largest single occupational category was that of general, field, or farm labourer (70), many of whom found only seasonal labour cutting hay or harvesting crops on farms outside the city. Other major occupations listed were female servants (29), shoemakers

⁷ See, for example, reports of the debate on the state of the poor in the Free Church general assembly of 1844. (*Scottish Herald and Weekly Advertiser*, 1st June 1844; *Witness*, 25th May 1844).

⁸ H.M. General Register House, Edinburgh, Census schedules for 1841, West Port and adjoining closes, parish no. 685 (St Cuthbert's), enumerator schedule nos. 62, 70, 72, 88, and 91.

⁹ See William Robertson [minister of New Greyfriar's] to Thomas Chalmers, 2nd May 1846, Thomas Chalmers Papers, New College Library, Edinburgh, [hereafter cited, T.C.P.], CHA. 4, uncatalogued correspondence.

including apprentices (25), street hawkers and pawnbrokers (21), smiths and nailers including apprentices (21), carters (10), and handloom weavers (8). The remaining occupations were scattered along a broad spectrum. Virtually all were independent tradesmen or workers in small manufacturing shops, with only three individuals described as factory workers.¹⁰ This, of course, is not surprising, for Edinburgh was not an industrial city. Geographical mobility among West Port inhabitants was high. Of a random sample of 30 families with children under five years of age residing in this area, taken from the census of 1841, only six families were still found in the area at the census of 1851. Of these, moreover, two families had shifted their location within the district. Mobility among single lodgers in the large boarding houses, where overcrowding and sanitary conditions were atrocious, was even greater.¹¹ With general conditions in the West Port affected for the worse by overcrowded boarding houses and by proximity to the cattlemarket, the tendency apparently was for most individuals to leave the area once they could afford it. Not all departed, however, and there does seem to have been a permanent nucleus of 50 to 70 substantial families in Chalmers' district.

As soon as the operation was underway, Chalmers and his associates conducted a survey of the religious and educational condition of families in the West Port district. Of the 411 families in the district in September 1844, 45 were members of a protestant church, and 70 were practicing Roman Catholics. There were 411 children of school age, of whom only 122 were attending one of the neighbouring schools.¹² The crime rate in the district, moreover, was apparently high. Indeed, 16 years earlier, the district had achieved national notoriety as the scene of the nefarious activities of Burke and Hare, two Irish immigrants who made their living smothering drunken victims in the West Port lodging houses to sell them as cadavers to Edinburgh university medical faculty. Chalmers' problem, then, was two-fold. First, his operation would have to provide institutions for religious worship and education, and convince those without interest to attend these institutions. Secondly, the operation would have to create community cohesion among an extremely impoverished and fluid population.

Chalmers, in fact, had proposed a territorial operation in the West Port as far back as 1838, delivering a public lecture in St George's church, Edinburgh on 18th January 1839, for the

¹⁰ Census schedules for 1841, see no. 8 above.

¹¹ The families were traced from the census schedules of 1841 cited above to those of 1851 for the same district, i.e., parish no. 705, enumerator schedule nos. 20-21, parish no. 708, 27-30, parish no. 725, 4. Virtually none of the lodgers of 1841 could be traced in 1851.

¹² William Hanna, *Memoirs of Dr Chalmers*, vol. iv (Edinburgh, 1852), 394-395.

purpose of announcing the plan and collecting financial subscriptions.¹³ As a result of the non-intrusion controversy, however, Chalmers' West Port operation had not advanced beyond the planning stage until May 1844, when Chalmers communicated with James Ewan, a young salaried agent of the Edinburgh City Mission, a dissenter-dominated voluntary association for home mission activity. Ewan was assigned to conduct sabbath services and visitations for the West Port, Grassmarket, and Lauriston areas, and was acquainted with many of the inhabitants. Although not a member of the Free Church, Ewan was enthusiastic about Chalmers' plan. After receiving permission from the City Mission directors to co-operate with Chalmers and still retain his City Mission salary, Ewan assumed responsibility for introducing Chalmers to the more respectable inhabitants of the West Port, and for mapping out the West Port district of 2,000 inhabitants, divided into 20 proportions of approximately 20 families each.¹⁴

The first meeting of Chalmers' West Port Local Society was held in the old Portsburgh courthouse on 27th July 1844. By this date, 10 voluntary visitors had been recruited, mainly middle-class professional men from Edinburgh's wealthy New Town, but also including three "respectable inhabitants" from the West Port itself, selected by Ewan. In addition, a business committee of 12 of Chalmers' wealthier friends had been appointed, to supervise financial arrangements. Although Chalmers expressly intended to create a Free Church congregation in the West Port, a significant proportion of both visitors and business managers were non-Free Church dissenters, reflecting the interdenominational aspect of Chalmers' campaign. At the initial meeting, Chalmers again outlined the three aspects of his community-building programme — visitations, schools, and a territorial church congregation. The 10 visitors were each assigned a proportion of the district and requested to commence regular household visitations immediately. It was also decided that the society would meet weekly, for discussion of the operation's problems and progress.¹⁵

Visitations were the most important component of Chalmers' programme, particularly during the initial stages of the operation. Chalmers believed there was no natural inclination in man for either religion or education. It was, therefore, the visitor's task to nurture some inclination, through frequent conversation with families in their homes. By assigning to each visitor the regular supervision of only 20 families, Chalmers believed that an

¹³ *Scottish Guardian*, 25th January 1839.

¹⁴ Ewan to Chalmers, 1st June 1844, T.C.P., CHA 5, West Port Box; J. Anderson, *Reminiscences of Thomas Chalmers*, 341-342; Chalmers Lauriston Church archives, West Port Local Society Minutes [hereafter W.P.L.S. minutes], 27th July 1844.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

intimate, trusting relationship would develop between the visitor and inhabitants. Indeed, the success of the territorial community-building operation depended upon the ability of the visitors to create a shared appreciation for religion and education among the inhabitants of the district.¹⁶

The theory appeared workable. Yet it proved difficult to recruit and to retain a sufficient number of effective visitors. By late September 1844, 15 visitors had been appointed. Of these, however, six attended few or no weekly society meetings from the start and evidently neglected their duties.¹⁷ The remaining nine visitors appeared active, but over half of the 20 proportions were unprovided or neglected during the initial months of operation, which seriously compromised the integrity of the scheme. In order to fill the vacant proportions, Chalmers began recruiting as visitors divinity students from the Free Church college. By 11th January 1845, all 20 proportions were at least nominally occupied, and Chalmers began assigning divinity students as assistants to inactive visitors. Although idealistic, the students proved to be transitory, each generally resigning after only a few months to assume a parish or tutorship.¹⁸ As a result, they failed to develop the intimate relationship with the inhabitants which Chalmers regarded as crucial for effective visitations. After the summer of 1845, most of the nine original active visitors resigned from the society.

The inability to recruit and retain effective visitors was largely the result of insufficient direction. Chalmers had believed that his published writings and public lectures of the summer of 1844 would provide sufficient guidelines for the visitors, and that therefore his personal supervision of visitation activity was unnecessary. Further, by personally maintaining a low profile in the operation, he intended to demonstrate that success in the West Port was not a function of his influence alone. In late August 1844, he was afflicted with a severe illness which left him unable to maintain an active rôle during the initial five months of the operation. Nonetheless, he remained optimistic about the effect of his incapacity. "Be assured," he wrote the society on 6th September 1844, "that our doings will be regarded as far more

¹⁶ See Chalmers' lectures on the territorial method in the *Witness*, especially 26th June 1844.

¹⁷ Although the sederunt for the W.P.L.S. meetings was noted in the minutes only until 31st Aug. 1844, periodic meetings were devoted to reports from the visitors from the start of the operation. Prior intimation of these meetings was given to all members. The six described as neglecting their proportions did not attend the meetings for which sederunt was recorded, nor submit reports at the meetings designated for this purpose.

¹⁸ Seven divinity students were recruited as visitors between 11th Jan. and 17th May 1845. Of these, only two were still members of the society on 30th June 1846. W.P.L.S. minutes; "List of Agents Labouring in the West Port, 30th June 1846", T.C.P., CHA 5, West Port Box.

imitable if, instead of being stimulated by the personal influence of any one individual, they are quietly and perseveringly performed by each man doing his duty.”¹⁹ In fact, however, discussions among the visitors during Chalmers’ absence revealed that a number were unclear about what their duty entailed. Many of those who soon resigned, or neglected their portions, had apparently grown discouraged in facing a situation of deprivation and irreligion, of which they had had little personal experience, and for which they received little advice or encouragement. Chalmers soon recognised his error, and, on regaining his health, attempted to revive the flagging visitation effort through increased personal supervision. Beginning on 5th April 1845, he devoted the first weekly society meeting of each month to the presentation of verbal reports from the visitors.²⁰ Nonetheless, by the summer of 1845 Chalmers had become too irregular in his attendance at these meetings to make the exercise effective for training or stimulating the visitors.

Another major reason for the ineffectiveness of the visitations was the programme’s neglect of the material needs of the West Port population. In Chalmers’ experiment at St John’s parish from 1819 to 1824, visiting elders and deacons had distributed money for poor relief from the sessional fund, endeavoured to stimulate the private charity of the neighbours and relatives of impoverished individuals, provided occasional donations from their own pockets, and often endeavoured to locate jobs for the unemployed. There was no such activity among West Port visitors. “I have raised,” Chalmers informed the Countess of Effingham on 10th January 1846, “no fund and recommended no method for providing for the temporal wants of the inhabitants of the West Port — convinced that if this formed any ostensible part of our proceedings, it would vitiate and distemper our whole system and raise an insuperable barrier in the way of achieving a pure Christian and moral good among the families of our district.” A few visitors suggested during the initial months of operation that the society might attempt to locate jobs or apprenticeships for those unemployed in the district. These suggestions, however, were remitted to the business managers and were allowed quietly to drop, no doubt on Chalmers’ instructions.²¹

Chalmers’ plan for the visitations, and indeed for the entire territorial operation was to eliminate destitution in the West Port through purely moral means. He placed great hope on the plan of a West Port district savings bank, open exclusively to West Port

¹⁹ W.P.L.S. minutes, 7th Sept. 1844.

²⁰ W.P.L.S. minutes, 29th Mar. and 5th Apr. 1845.

²¹ W.P.L.S. minutes, 10th Aug. 1844; Chalmers to the Countess of Effingham, 10th Jan. 1846, T.C.P., CHA 5, West Port Box.

inhabitants, and operated with the assistance of the visitors. Through participation in the savings bank scheme, he believed, the inhabitants would learn habits of self-reliance and foresight, while at the same time accumulating enough capital to carry them through periods of unemployment in reasonable comfort. Indeed, he perceived in savings banks the only means for the permanent material elevation of the depressed working classes. On Chalmers' instructions, a savings bank was opened on 9th May 1845. According to his plan, an individual's savings accumulated in the West Port district bank office until they reached one shilling, at which point an interest-drawing account was opened in the National Security Savings Bank of Edinburgh. Money could be withdrawn from the account only with the written permission of the West Port savings bank treasurer. The visitors, meanwhile, were instructed to solicit deposits during their visitation rounds.²² Despite Chalmers' high hopes for the savings bank scheme (indeed, on 8th February 1845, he instructed the society to devote one weekly society meeting each month to discussion of the savings bank's progress), the amounts deposited were not impressive. In January 1846, the balance for the whole of the district was only £9, spread thinly among at least 60 separate accounts.²³ In a word, the savings bank programme presented no quick panacea for urban poverty where unemployment was high, and incomes barely sufficient to sustain life. Chalmers, of course, argued that the savings programme required time, and that eventually it would lift families out of the grip of poverty. Promises for future well-being, however, did not create trust among hungry families in the good intentions of visitors, who offered neither material assistance nor employment opportunities in the present. Indeed, the extreme scantiness of the deposits was no doubt an indication of the population's resentment, or at best indifference toward the visitations.

Despite the difficulties, however, visitors claimed to have achieved some results through purely moral and spiritual exhortations. William Marshall, a wealthy lawyer, and William Wilson, a printer, established weekly prayer meetings in their portions, which continued for several months with an average attendance of 12 to 15 individuals. Between August 1844 and September 1846, visitors reported a total of perhaps two dozen cases in which efforts had achieved visible improvement in the manners and morals of individuals, including the typical mid-century Evangelical anecdotes of tearful conversions by habitual drunkards, blasphemers, and even a "unitarian shoemaker",

²² W.P.L.S. minutes, 21 and 28 Dec. 1844, 1st Feb. 1845, 1 Mar. 1845; Thomas Chalmers, *Churches and Schools for the Working Classes* (Edinburgh, 1846), 12, 16.

²³ W.P.L.S. minutes, 28th June 1845, 24th Jan. 1846.

which may or may not have been lasting in their effects. During this same period, the visitors distributed *gratis* over 13,000 tracts, supplied by the Edinburgh Religious Tract Society, which, again, may or may not have been read.²⁴

Such achievements, of course, paled in the face of mass destitution and irreligion in the West Port. With insufficient direction from Chalmers, and with the failure of purely moral persuasion to improve or soften the effects of material poverty, even initially enthusiastic visitors grew discouraged, and withdrew from the society, generally without even a formal announcement of resignation. By 6th September 1846, the society had been forced to reduce the number of visitor's proportions from 20 to 14. Of these, two were now unoccupied, two had been assigned visitors only within the last three weeks, and one had received no attention from its visitor for several months. Only six visitors reported that they had even entered their assigned proportions within the last month. Of the nine active visitors in September 1844, only two remained members of the society; and at the meeting on 6th September 1846, William Wilson, the most active of the original visitors, confessed "his district to be sinking into a worse condition than ever". He had, he continued, been obliged to give up his weekly prayer meeting, "owing to the bad attendance". On this same date, the entire society expressed grave concern over "the increasing immorality and destitution which prevails in the West Port". Unexpressed, but implicit in the minute, was the society's disappointment with Chalmers, who apparently had attended only one weekly society meeting in the last six months. At any rate, the minute of 6th September 1846 formed the last record of the West Port Local Society, which now ceased meeting altogether. Chalmers attempted to revive the effort with a letter to the society on 26th September 1846, apologising for his absence, and promising more regular attendance in future. This communication, however, arrived too late to stave off the dissolution.²⁵

The dissolution of the society underlined the greatest failure of Chalmers' West Port operation. In a word, he had failed to create an agency of voluntary workers to carry out a sustained visitation programme in the face of discouragement. This had resulted in part from the aging Chalmers' fading power of inspiring sustained voluntary activity. More important, however, it demonstrated the incapacity of voluntary effort to achieve through purely moral persuasion a rapid and significant social transformation in the urban environment of the 1840s. Chalmers had expected too

²⁴ Extract from W.P.L.S. minutes, 13th June 1846, T.C.P., CHA 5, West Port Box.

²⁵ Extract from W.P.L.S. minutes, 6th Sept. 1846, Chalmers to the secretary of the W.P.L.S., 26th September 1846, T.C.P., CHA 5, West Port Box.

much from the visitors, particularly after depriving them of any system of material assistance for the poor, and discouraging them from seeking jobs for the West Port unemployed. Bound firmly to his theory of the potential of purely moral persuasion to create a spirit of individual self-help and communal co-operation, he had been blind to the real need of many West Port inhabitants for immediate material assistance. Ignoring this need had probably cost Chalmers and the visitors the trust of most in the district.

Chalmers' West Port operation proved more successful in its educational programme. Chalmers assigned a high importance to general education, believing it to provide the opportunity for improvement in material living standards for the poor, as well as enabling them better to understand scriptural Christianity. At the beginning of the operation in July 1844, Chalmers had requested William Gibson, superintendent of schools for the Free Church, to locate a suitable schoolmaster. On Gibson's suggestion, Chalmers chose Alexander Sinclair, a young teacher who had achieved notable success among the working-class youth of Greenock. "Be assured," Chalmers wrote to Sinclair on 30th October 1844, "that you will meet with a full average of talent among the ragged children of this outlandish population. Our great object in fact is to reclaim them from their present outlandishness and raise them to a higher platform." Sinclair, Chalmers continued, would have the opportunity to provide the nation with a model for "plebeian education".²⁶

On 11th November 1844, the West Port school was opened, with Sinclair as schoolmaster. Classes were held in large rooms fitted out above a deserted tannery. There were in fact three separate sets of classes under Sinclair's superintendence. First, young boys attended a day school, taught by Sinclair with the assistance of four monitors, advanced students from the nearby Normal Academy for the training of teachers. Secondly, young girls attended Sinclair's day school with the boys for half of each schoolday. For the remaining half-day, the girls attended classes in domestic skills, taught by one Miss Rodgers, whose salary and expenses were paid by several wealthy female patrons. Thirdly, adolescents and young adults, both male and female, attended an evening school for two hours each week-night, taught by a Mr Thomson, who was also assisted by four monitors from the Normal Academy.²⁷

Chalmers allowed Sinclair liberty in determining the curricula and methods in the schools. Sinclair's day school curriculum was a general one, providing the elements of reading, writing, natural

²⁶ W.P.L.S. minutes, 7th Sept., 2nd Nov. and 9th Nov. 1844.

²⁷ Chalmers Lauriston Church archives, Finlay Macpherson, secretary of the W.P.L.S., to the Countess of Effingham, 23rd Sept. 1844, and 6th Jan. 1845; W.P.L.S. minutes, 2nd Nov. 1844.

science, and geography to all pupils, and offering special instruction in English grammar, mathematics, and Latin for those demonstrating promise or interest.²⁸ While the main purpose of the schools was to provide elementary education for all West Port youth, special assistance was extended to the "lad o' pairts", who might advance to university study on a bursary. School fees were set at the modest rate of 2d. per week for day school pupils, and 1½d. for evening students. In his public statements, Chalmers was insistent that the fees be mandatory, in order to impress West Port families with the value of education.²⁹ Nonetheless, he privately instructed Sinclair that no child should be excluded for non-payment. Although society visitors were instructed to apply pressure to non-fee-paying families in their proportions, at no point prior to March 1846, at least, did more than half of the pupils pay their fees.³⁰ In short, the schools remained heavily dependent upon funds provided by the West Port Local Society.

From the opening of the schools, attendance increased steadily. In November 1844, 64 attended the day schools, and 57 the evening classes. By November 1845, the attendance had increased to 250 and 70 respectively.³¹ The success of the schools, meanwhile, soon encouraged additional educational and child-welfare programmes. In April 1845, the society established a district lending library, with a divinity student assigned as librarian. A few weeks later, a reading room for adults was fitted out in a room in the deserted tannery, offering several newspapers and journals. In May 1845, an infant or nursery school was founded on the principles established by David Stow, the Glasgow educational reformer, with a divinity student hired to conduct the school.³² A washing-house, moreover, had been fitted out in December 1844 in rooms adjoining the school, with facilities for laundry and bathing. All school children were regularly bathed, while the boys at least received periodic haircuts at the society's expense.³³

For the children's religious instruction, Chalmers relied mainly upon sabbath schools. By keeping strict doctrinal instruction out of the day and evening schools, he probably hoped to encourage

²⁸ In July 1846, 269 children attended the day school. Of these, all 269 received instruction in English, geography, and natural science, while 80 received additional instruction in arithmetic, 34 in English grammar, 17 in higher mathematics, and 1 in Latin. There is no evidence that the children were required to pay additional fees for special instruction. (Chalmers Lauriston Church archives, Finlay Macpherson to the Countess of Effingham, July 1846).

²⁹ *Scottish Guardian*, 11th Mar. 1845; Chalmers, *Churches and Schools for the Working Classes*, 14-15; W.P.L.S. minutes, 22nd Mar. 1845.

³⁰ Extract from W.P.L.S. minutes, 21st Mar. 1846, T.C.P., CHA 5, West Port Box.

³¹ W.P.L.S. minutes, 16th Nov. 1844, 8th Nov. 1845.

³² W.P.L.S. minutes, 5th Apr., 19th Apr., 26th Apr., 24th May, and 12th July 1845.

³³ W.P.L.S. minutes, 21st Dec. 1844, 19th Apr. and 8th Nov. 1845.

the attendance of Roman Catholic children at these institutions (although there is no evidence that Roman Catholic children did attend). At the same time, he had intended that the visitors should establish sabbath schools in their proportions. On 1st February 1845, the society agreed to defray all expenses incurred by visitors for this purpose. Nonetheless, as in other matters, the visitors were less than successful in this endeavour, and by September only three visitors had started sabbath schools. In October, a fresh start was made when a separate West Port Sabbath School Society was founded under Chalmers' direction, with a superintendent, secretary, treasurer, and 22 voluntary teachers, mainly women. The sabbath school movement now progressed rapidly, until by March 1846, an average of 150 pupils were receiving sabbath instruction in the West Port.³⁴

Chalmers was justifiably proud of his operation's achievements in education. Indeed, he made Sinclair's day school, with the adjoining lending library, reading room, infant school, and washing-house, a showpiece for the entire operation. On 6th August 1845, for instance, Chalmers staged a public exhibition in the form of an examination of Sinclair's pupils. Dozens of wealthy and influential Edinburgh citizens were invited, including Hugh Miller, the editor of the *Free Church Witness* newspaper, who printed a glowing account. "Smile as one might," Miller noted of the entertaining spectacle of ragged children struggling to explain, appropriately, the scientific theory of light, "there is no mistaking the fact, that the minds of these children, which, save for this school, would in all probability have slept on for life, were fully awakened".³⁵ After this date, a steady stream of wealthy individuals were taken, often by Chalmers himself, to observe the day school in operation.

The heart of Chalmers' ideal territorial Christian community was to be an active church congregation, composed exclusively of inhabitants of the district. James Ewan, the Edinburgh City Missionary in the combined West Port, Grassmarket, and Lauriston districts, was already conducting two religious services each Sunday in the old Portsburgh courthouse when Chalmers began his operation. Attendance at Ewan's services in the summer of 1844 averaged 50 in the morning and 100 in the evening.³⁶ After consultations with Chalmers, Ewan became an active member of Chalmers' West Port Local Society. Chalmers, meanwhile, instructed his visitors to request the inhabitants of their proportions to attend Ewan's services which, after

³⁴ W.P.L.S. minutes, 13th Dec. 1845; Chalmers Lauriston Church archives, Finlay Macpherson to the Countess of Effingham, 6th Mar. 1846; "Teachers in West Port Sabbath School, 24th June 1846", T.C.P., CHA 5, West Port Box.

³⁵ *Witness*, 9th August 1845; J. Anderson, *Reminiscences of Thomas Chalmers*, 358-360.

³⁶ W.P.L.S. minutes, 24th Aug. 1844.

November 1844, were conducted in the school-rooms above the tannery. Chalmers also decided that Ewan would make a very suitable minister of the Free Church which he intended to found in the West Port, and so enrolled him in theological courses at the Free Church College, in preparation for Free Church licensing and ordination.³⁷ Despite his connection with Chalmers' operation, Ewan still continued to draw his salary of £40 per annum from the City Mission.

This arrangement continued smoothly for a few months, and attendance at Ewan's services gradually began to increase. In January 1845, however, the congregational aspect of the operation suffered a major setback when Ewan was discovered to have accepted a bribe while serving as an arbiter in a financial dispute between two West Port inhabitants. The affair became widely known, and the City Mission directors would have demanded Ewan's immediate resignation had not Chalmers personally intervened. As it was, Ewan was censured by the City Mission, and Chalmers found himself constrained by public opinion to locate another candidate for the West Port ministry. The affair, Chalmers confessed to the City Mission directors on 27th February 1845, had set back by at least a full year his timetable for founding a West Port Free Church and it had weakened public confidence in his society workers.³⁸ Early in February 1845, Chalmers decided that William Tasker, one of his Free Church divinity students, should become the first West Port minister.³⁹

Tasker was 34 years old in 1845, with experience as a school teacher and home missionary in the west of Scotland. He had been moved to enter the Free Church divinity hall after the Disruption, by the pressing need for Free Church ministers.⁴⁰ His success as a home missionary in Port Glasgow was widely respected, and Chalmers did not gain his services without difficulty. Free Church leaders in the west had intended Tasker for the parish of Kilmalcolm. Indeed, Patrick MacFarlane, minister of Greenock and a leader in the Free Church, was angered when he learned that Chalmers had enlisted Tasker. "Edinburgh", MacFarlane complained to James Morrison, a Free Church minister, on 6th March 1845, "has the command of more than one half of our preachers. If Dr C. cannot find one so well-fitted as Mr Tasker for the district in which he takes so deep an

³⁷ Chalmers Lauriston Church archives, Finlay Macpherson to the Countess of Effingham, 9th April 1845.

³⁸ National Library of Scotland [N.L.S.], Acc. 7247 (2), Minutes of the Edinburgh City Mission (xerox copy), 5th February 1845; Chalmers to the Directors of the City Mission, 27th Feb. 1845, T.C.P., CHA 5, West Port Box.

³⁹ W.P.L.S. minutes, 1st Feb., 15th Feb. 1845.

⁴⁰ [James Jolly], *Memorials of the Rev. William Tasker* (Edinburgh, 1880), 5-18; [James Jolly], *The Story of the West Port Church, with Notices of Chalmers and Tasker* (Edinburgh, 1882), 21-28.

interest, he is at least in a better situation than we are who can find none at all for Kilmalcolm.”⁴¹ MacFarlane and others remonstrated with Chalmers in vain, and in April 1845 Tasker was hired as the West Port missionary, with a salary of £150 per annum, paid by the West Port Local Society.⁴² At the same time, Ewan tendered his resignation to the City Mission. Chalmers, however, did not foresake Ewan, and he continued in the West Port as assistant missionary to Tasker, with his salary of £40 per annum now also paid by the society.⁴³

Tasker proved to be a fortunate choice. He pursued his duties with dogged determination, personally visiting all the families of the district, assisting Sinclair with the supervision of the schools, and conducting three services each Sunday. Indeed, although not sufficient to save the visitation effort, Tasker’s unquestionable integrity and activity probably preserved the church and school operations in the West Port from dissolution.

After April 1845, Chalmers assumed a more active interest in the West Port congregation, preaching once every three months in the school-rooms, and when not preaching, often standing guard over the collection plate, eagerly counting the penny donations, to which he attached a “high moral value”. As with Sinclair’s school, he employed Tasker’s services as a device for exhibiting his operation’s achievements, bringing wealthy potential patrons of the society to observe the congregation. Although the numbers at the sabbath services did not greatly increase beyond the average in the summer of 1844, Chalmers could report in December 1845 that many families were more regular in their attendance. Perhaps 200 West Port inhabitants, out of the district population of 2,000, now attended regularly.⁴⁴ In order to consolidate this congregation, Chalmers planned to erect a church and school building, and in the summer of 1845 had purchased a site for £330.⁴⁵

By the beginning of 1846, after functioning for a year and a half, Chalmers’ territorial operation had achieved some significant results, particularly in education. Nonetheless, the operation had by no means fulfilled Chalmers’ initial expectations, as described in his public lectures of the summer of 1844. In particular, the

⁴¹ Patrick MacFarlane to J. Morrison, 6th Mar. 1845, T.C.P., CHA 4.

⁴² Although Tasker’s salary was initially set at £100 per annum, Chalmers raised this to £150 per annum, effective for the first year, several months later in recognition of Tasker’s efforts. W.P.L.S. minutes, 29th Mar. 1845; Tasker to Chalmers, 13th Jan. 1846, T.C.P., CHA 5, West Port Box.

⁴³ N.L.S., Acc. 7247 (2), Minutes of the Edinburgh City Mission, 23rd Apr. 1845; Chalmers Lauriston Church archives, Finlay Macpherson to the Countess of Effingham, 9th Apr. 1945.

⁴⁴ *Witness*, 9th Aug. 1845; *Autobiography of Mrs Fletcher* (Edinburgh, 1875), 259; Chalmers, *Churches and Schools for the Working Classes*, 15-16.

⁴⁵ William Marshall to Chalmers, 26th July 1845, T.C.P., CHA 5, West Port Box; Chalmers, *Churches and Schools for the Working Classes*, 20.

voluntary visitation scheme had proved a disappointment. Because of the ineffectiveness of the visitations, Chalmers had been forced to rely to a much greater degree than he had anticipated upon salaried agents supported by the West Port Local Society. By 1846, the society was supporting two missionaries at a cost of £190 per annum, and four school teachers at £150 per annum. In addition, the society employed part-time eight school monitors and a cleaning woman. The costs, moreover, for fitting up the school-rooms, reading-room, and washing-house, and for providing books, paper, heating, soap, haircuts, etc., had been high.⁴⁶ The very modest school fees and sabbath collections, by contrast, defrayed only a small fraction of the operation's expenses.

Chalmers must have been embarrassed by the financial aspect. On 7th March 1845, he asserted in a public lecture in Glasgow that a West Port style of territorial operation for a population of 2,000 could be conducted at a cost of £100 per annum, within the means of a single wealthy patron.⁴⁷ Several months later, at a public meeting in Edinburgh on 27th December 1845, he raised this estimate slightly to £150 per annum.⁴⁸ While these estimates did not include the erection of a church building, they did supposedly represent the costs for a missionary, schools, and all affiliated programmes. In truth, during the initial sixteen months of the West Port operation, Chalmers received at least £1,137 from wealthy admirers. Of this sum, £330 was employed in purchasing a site for the proposed church and school building, and the remaining £807 was used to meet the expenses of the operation for the first 16 months.⁴⁹ Chalmers, in fact, may have received and disbursed even more than this amount, for it is difficult to ascertain precisely the financial arrangements. The

⁴⁶ See "Disbursements for the West Port School, Nov. 1844 to Feb. 1845", T.C.P., CHA 5, West Port Box.

⁴⁷ *Scottish Guardian*, 11th March 1845.

⁴⁸ Chalmers, *Churches and Schools for the Working Classes*, 22.

⁴⁹ The income is determined from three sources: first, the "Abstract of Accounts of Treasurer of West Port Association", T.C.P., CHA 5, West Port Box; secondly, letters from James Lenox of New York to Chalmers containing subscriptions, of which only one is recorded in the treasurer's account, T.C.P., CHA 4, uncatalogued correspondence of 1844 and 1845; and thirdly, subscription letters from Lady Nairne of Perthshire and a Miss Portal of London sent to Chalmers in April 1845, in which the amounts specified were not recorded in the treasurer's accounts, T.C.P., CHA 5, West Port Box. In late 1845, Chalmers began collecting subscriptions for the West Port church and school building. These subscriptions, of course, were not included in determining the regular income for the first 16 months. Chalmers and the society mentioned repeatedly that they had to commence a building fund from nothing in December 1845, from which it may be inferred that virtually all the amounts received before December 1845 had been spent to meet regular operating costs. In his *Memoirs of Dr Chalmers*, vol. iv, 415, William Hanna asserts that the entire cost for the West Port operation from 1844 to 1852 was less than £5,500. This figure is a gross underestimate.

funds were originally kept in a bank account under the authority of the society's business managers. In May 1845, however, Chalmers cleared this account, depositing the funds in two personal accounts.⁵⁰ After the Ewan bribery affair, he was probably simply being careful. Then, on 11th October 1845, he announced at a weekly society meeting that he would no longer regard himself accountable to the society for either the amounts he received, or disbursed, for the West Port operation.⁵¹ Chalmers may well have intended to cover up the growing costs of the operation. If these costs had become publicly known, critics might have argued that a West Port operation could succeed only where there was a Chalmers to mobilise donations from wealthy admirers. Such criticism, in fact, would not have been unwarranted. Between 14th September 1844 and 26th January 1847, for instance, James Lenox, a wealthy New York lawyer, donated £1,000 to Chalmers for his West Port operation, on the condition that the gifts remained anonymous. Lenox had never visited Scotland, and his gifts were simply the outcome of his personal admiration for Chalmers.⁵² Chalmers preserved the anonymity of Lenox's gifts, and evidently did not even report to the society that he had received more than £200 from Lenox.⁵³ Other large donations were also received from Chalmers' admirers, including £100 from Francis Jeffrey, the celebrated Whig editor of the *Edinburgh Review*.⁵⁴

Neither Chalmers nor the society should be faulted for the amounts spent in the West Port. There was apparently no financial mismanagement, and the educational achievements, at least, were substantial. Chalmers might well have argued that the extreme destitution of the West Port presented a special case, and that operations in less impoverished districts of 2,000 inhabitants would cost less. Nonetheless, he was at best deliberately vague about the financial arrangements for the West Port operation. The reason was probably his intention that the West Port scheme should act as a model for hundreds of similar operations throughout Scotland. A true picture of West Port finances, and the operation's heavy reliance upon paid agents, might well have discouraged emulation.

⁵⁰ "Abstract of Accounts of Treasurer of West Port Association", T.C.P., CHA 5, West Port Box; Chalmers Lauriston Church archives, Kirk Session Minutes of Chalmers Territorial Church, West Port, 15th July 1847.

⁵¹ W.P.L.S. minutes, 11th Oct. 1845.

⁵² Lenox to Chalmers, New York, 14th Sept. 1844, 28th Nov. 1845, 28th Oct. 1846, 26th Jan. 1847, T.C.P., CHA 4.

⁵³ The "Abstract of Accounts of Treasurer of West Port Association: List of subscriptions, July 1844 to January 1845" contains apparently the only listing of a sum received from Lenox, i.e., £200 from "a Friend". T.C.P., CHA 5, West Port Box.

⁵⁴ Jeffrey to Chalmers, 7 Jan. 1846, T.C.P., CHA 5, West Port Box.

While the West Port operation was being pursued, Chalmers vigorously endeavoured to create public enthusiasm for his national and interdenominational community-building campaign. In 1844 and 1845, he published three articles in the *North British Review*, reiterating his argument that only territorial Christian communities, like that intended for the West Port, could preserve the nation from the growing evils of pauperism and working-class political disaffection.⁵⁵ In March, 1845, he delivered a public lecture in Glasgow, describing the West Port operation as the culmination of the St John's experiment in urban ministry, and calling upon Glasgow philanthropists to begin similar operations.⁵⁶ In May 1845, he announced his retirement, effective in May 1846, from all committee work in the Free Church, in order, as he informed the West Port Local Society, to devote himself solely to the social reform campaign represented by the West Port model.⁵⁷ In the introductory essay to a volume of *Essays on Christian Union*, published in late 1845, he reasserted his argument that an interdenominational home mission enterprise would provide the catalyst for church union.⁵⁸

The most important expression of his campaign was his address to a body of civic leaders in the Royal Hotel, Edinburgh, on 27th December 1845, subsequently published under the title *Churches and Schools for the Working Classes*. After repeating his arguments for a voluntary, interdenominational effort for the creation of territorial Christian communities, he proceeded to sketch a somewhat exaggerated picture of his achievements in the West Port. His conclusion was that the West Port operation had already been an overwhelming success, and had proved decisively that similar operations could be conducted by other voluntary visiting societies at the modest cost of £150 per annum. Further, he asserted that no fewer than five districts for operations on the West Port model had been mapped out in the destitute Old Town in Edinburgh, which promised to create "a chain of forts all the way from the South Bridge to the Main Point". In addition to the five "forts", he learned that the Duchess of Gordon had promised to assume the expenses for an operation at the lower end of the Canongate, and he hoped that the Rev James Robertson's United Secession congregation in the Vennel could be persuaded to undertake an operation in the Grassmarket. In a word, it appeared that Chalmers' dream for the organisation of Edinburgh

⁵⁵ "The Political Economy of the Bible", *North British Review*, no. iii (November, 1844), 1-52; "Report on the Poor Laws of Scotland", *North British Review*, no. iv (February, 1845), 471-513; "Savings Banks", *North British Review*, no. vi (August, 1845), 318-344.

⁵⁶ *Scottish Guardian*, 11th Mar. 1845.

⁵⁷ *Witness*, 17th May 1845; J. Anderson, *Reminiscences of Thomas Chalmers*, 352.

⁵⁸ *Essays on Christian Union* (London, 1845), 3-17.

into territorial Christian communities might soon be fulfilled. To the sceptics who argued that this was merely a scheme, under false pretence, for the extension of the Free Church, Chalmers replied with indignation. "Who cares about the Free Church," he exclaimed, "compared with the Christian good of the people of Scotland? Who cares for any Church, but as an instrument of Christian good? for, be assured, that the moral and religious well-being of the population is infinitely of higher importance than the advancement of any sect".⁵⁹

Impressed by the apparent progress of Chalmers' territorial campaign, the Edinburgh City Mission now acted to establish a central institutional structure for Chalmers' plan. At a public meeting on 30th January 1846, chaired by the Whig lord provost Adam Black, the City Mission directors announced a plan by which each territorial operation established on Chalmers' West Port model would send one delegate to a City Mission general committee. This committee, headed by a salaried full-time superintendent, would advertise the campaign, collect subscriptions, and direct the several operations on a city-wide level. Although unable to attend the meeting, Chalmers sent an encouraging letter which was read aloud, and later incorporated into the published report of the proceedings.⁶⁰ Later, on 28th February 1846, he further expressed his approval of the City Mission plan to Charles Spence, the City Mission secretary. Although opposed to too much centralised direction for the operations, which might have had the effect of discouraging local initiative, Chalmers nonetheless believed that the City Mission general committee might prove to be of assistance in creating a central mission fund, from which local operations could draw according to their needs.⁶¹ Through personal meetings with some of the leaders of the major Edinburgh denominations, Chalmers endeavoured to broaden the base of support for the campaign.⁶²

Despite apparent progress and City Mission support, Chalmers' territorial Christian community-building campaign failed to materialise on a national, or even city-wide, level. The "chain of forts" in the Old Town, with their spheres of influence supposedly mapped out, remained confined within Chalmers' imagination. After several months of unsuccessful attempts to stir

⁵⁹ Chalmers, *Churches and Schools for the Working Classes*. Despite Chalmers' emphasis upon the interdenominational aspect of the campaign, critics noted that of the seven proposed operations described, six were Free Church affiliated. See James MacAllan [an elder from New Greyfriar's parish] to Chalmers, 4th March 1846, T.C.P., CHA 4.

⁶⁰ *Witness*, 21st Jan. 1846, 4th Feb. 1846; *Seventh Biennial Report of the Edinburgh City Mission* (Edinburgh, 1846), 6-14, 44-47.

⁶¹ *Correspondence of Thomas Chalmers*, ed. W. Hanna (Edinburgh, 1853), 453-455.

⁶² E.g., N.L.S., Acc. 6134, Box 1.1. Chalmers to Dr John Brown of Broughton Street Chapel, 10th September 1846.

public enthusiasm, the City Mission relinquished its plan for a general committee. By late 1846, Chalmers' campaign was moribund. One reason for this failure, perhaps, was that much of the philanthropic money and energy which might have been invested in Chalmers' campaign was diverted instead to the famine-stricken Highlands and Ireland. Indeed, by late 1846, Chalmers himself was paying more attention to the urgent demands of the famine than to his community-building campaign.⁶³ Another reason might have been the great public outcry in Scotland in 1845 and 1846 against the Free Church for accepting financial donations from presbyterian congregations in the slave-holding states of the American south. Chalmers defended the contributions, and asserted the duty of Scottish churches to maintain a communion with Christians even in slave-holding states. This position antagonised many Scottish Evangelicals, and probably hindered possible interdenominational co-operation for Chalmers' campaign.⁶⁴

In truth, however, Chalmers' campaign had made little progress because his model operation in the West Port had failed either to capture the imagination of the Christian nation, or to convince fellow philanthropists that it might be emulated effectively on a national level. One of the great public figures in Scotland, it was true, had managed to recruit voluntary visitors, and to mobilise sufficient funds for hiring professional missionaries and teachers, and for establishing schools, a library, and savings bank in a destitute district of Edinburgh. This was, to be sure, commendable. Nonetheless, there were few individuals or church congregations with Chalmers' power to mobilise charitable donations or voluntary effort. There were only two attempts in Edinburgh to emulate Chalmers' West Port model — one began with the financial support of the Duchess of Gordon at the lower end of the Canongate in 1846-47, and the other with the financial support of R. S. Candlish's wealthy Free St George's congregation in the Fountainbridge district in 1853. Both were Free Church affiliated. Although little information survives regarding the Duchess of Gordon's Holyrood Territorial Church, Candlish's congregation admitted to a heavy reliance on salaried agents, and to greater expenses than they had expected, or could

⁶³ [Thomas Chalmers], "Political Economy of a Famine", *North British Review*, no. xiii (May 1847), 247-290; "Letters and press cuttings relating to the famine". T.C.P., CHA 5.

⁶⁴ Chalmers' position strained his relations with lord provost Adam Black, one of the primary movers of the Edinburgh City Mission plan of January 1846. Adam Black to Chalmers, 15th May 1846, T.C.P., CHA 4; N.L.S., MS. 3713, fo. 184, Chalmers to Black, 23rd May 1846; Alexander Nicholson, *Memoirs of Adam Black* (Edinburgh, 1885), 134-135; George Shepperson, "The Free Church and American Slavery", *Scottish Historical Review*, xxx (1951), 126-143.

themselves afford, in conducting their Fountainbridge territorial operation.⁶⁵

Regardless of the expenses or labour required, it must have been obvious to outside observers, as it had been to Chalmers' own visitors, that large financial investments and months of voluntary effort had not made significant progress toward creating a territorial Christian community in the West Port. By late 1846, it is true, perhaps 50 West Port families out of a total of over 400 were attending Tasker's sabbath services, and sending their children to the West Port schools. Most of these families, however, had probably been attending Ewan's City Mission sabbath services two-and-a-half years before, and sending their children to neighbouring parish or charity schools. They represented, in a word, a group of upwardly-mobile working-class families, prepared to employ to advantage opportunities for social advancement and respectability. Such a group might have been found in any lower-class district of a mid-19th-century city. Largely because of the ineffectiveness of the voluntary visitation programme, Chalmers' operation, after two-and-a-half years, had failed to make a substantial impact on the great mass of West Port inhabitants who apparently cared little for protestant religion, education, or the traditional communal values of a rural parish. They remained, as before, largely a rootless, impoverished, and often lawless population. In short, despite Chalmers' insistence upon the "territorial" method, the West Port church and school functioned all too much upon the "gathered" method, attracting those with religious inclination and social ambition, while failing to reach the rootless and irreligious mass of inhabitants. It might well be argued, of course, that Chalmers' operation required more than only two-and-a-half years to produce substantial results in such a district as the West Port. Nonetheless, Chalmers had not had much time. Events, including the making of the Scottish poor law act of 1845, and the famine of 1846, were moving Scottish public opinion rapidly away from the old faith in voluntary charity and parochial Christian communities as viable means for social organisation and improvement. Further, with his health never strong, Chalmers at the age of 66 was already an old man. The campaign represented by the West Port operation, as he himself knew, was his final opportunity to convince the nation of the viability of his social ideal. Realising, perhaps, that his would not be a long life, he had pressed for a city, and for a national, territorial community-building campaign with a sense of urgency. By late 1846, however, the opportunity had passed. Chalmers' West Port operation in itself was not a failure. It was simply not the

⁶⁵ R. S. Candlish, *Chalmers Territorial Church, Fountainbridge: A Narrative and Sermon* (Edinburgh, 1854), 5-29.

resounding success which would have been necessary to wrest the nation from its movement away from the ideal of parish communities and church-directed social services toward the social welfare state.

Although his national community-building campaign was largely moribund by late 1846, Chalmers continued his personal interest in the West Port. Indeed, his concern for the West Port church, "the child of Dr Chalmers' old age", increased as the national campaign faded. His West Port activity became more a source of personal fulfilment than a model for the future. In January 1846, he had begun soliciting donations from his friends and admirers for the erection of a West Port church and school building. After difficulties both in collecting the £2,007 required to meet building costs and in the actual construction, the building was dedicated by Chalmers on 19th February 1847. Tasker became the minister. "I wish", Chalmers wrote to James Lenox on 27th March 1847, "to communicate what to me is the most joyful event of my life. I have been intent for 30 years on the completion of a territorial experiment, and I have now to bless God for the consummation of it".⁶⁶ Two months later, Chalmers died peacefully in his sleep.

Despite Chalmers' sanguine words to Lenox, the West Port church and school were not in fact so firmly established. The West Port Local Society, of course, had dissolved in September 1846; and earlier in March 1846 Sinclair had resigned as schoolmaster. The achievement of making the West Port machinery work following Chalmers' death belonged almost exclusively to Tasker, who proved to be one of the most gifted and dedicated parish ministers of the 19th-century Free Church. Through extraordinary exertion, Tasker managed by 1851 to create a West Port congregation with over 400 communicants, to appoint a kirk session of West Port inhabitants who conducted district visitations, and to strengthen the system of day, evening, and sabbath schools, providing instruction to 470 children and young adults. The expenses for the operation in 1850-51, according to Tasker, were merely £400 per annum, of which only £100 per annum had to be contributed by patrons from outside the district.⁶⁷ Before his death in 1879, Tasker had consolidated the congregation, which has survived to the present. Indeed, it might be argued that Tasker had eventually succeeded in demonstrating, in large part, the viability of Chalmers' territorial plan. In the event, however, the major factor in eliminating extreme destitution and crime in the West Port had not been Tasker's territorial ministry, impressive though it was, but rather

⁶⁶ "Cost of West Port Church and Schools from Aggregate Account of Estimate, 3rd April 1847", T.C.P., CHA 5, West Port Box; W. Hanna, *Memoirs of Dr Chalmers*, vol. iv, 411.

⁶⁷ *Christian Journal*, vol. ii (1851), 489-494.

the activity of the civic authorities in Edinburgh. In the early 1860s, through acts for the removal of civic nuisances, and through the activity of the street commission in widening the West Port, civic authorities had begun demolishing the overcrowded lodging houses and unsanitary closes.⁶⁸ The actual solution for the West Port problem, then, was not the organisation of the existing population into a stable community, through visitations, church, and schools. Rather, it was the radical depopulation of the overcrowded district, perhaps the only solution possible.

⁶⁸ Tasker pressed the civic authorities for the demolition of overcrowded West Port lodging houses, such as "Crombie's Land" — "a sink of social and moral pollution, since Dr Chalmers and I set up our Church and Schools in 1844". William Tasker to lord provost William Chambers, "private and confidential", 11th Sept. 1867, Edinburgh City Chambers, Misc. Documents, vol. xxi, bundle 25a, Town Clerk's Letters, no. 14.

